INSTRUCTOR’S FORWORD

In the essay you are about to read, Kris Sankaran observes that, “the power of theater emerges from its ability to engage those from dramatically different contexts.” In the spirit of adaptation, which is Kris’s subject, I would say that the power of this essay emerges from Kris’s ability to engage dramatically different contexts and his ability to bring these contexts into conversation with one another.

Either of the two adaptations that Kris chose to analyze would have provided enough material for a fascinating essay. After all, one of the texts that the essay engages with is, as Kris points out when introducing it, fifteen times longer than the Bible. It was, however, to the benefit of his argument that he ultimately decided to study cross-cultural theatrical adaptation from both sides of the equation. He organized his essay around a production of a well-known play by an English playwright in the style of a traditional Indian performance and an English theatrical adaptation of an important Indian religious text. Juxtaposing an English dramatization of the Mahabharata and a Kathakali production of King Lear helped Kris arrive at an appropriately complex understanding of both the dangers and the opportunities of cultural interchange. In its consideration of different examples of and viewpoints towards cultural interchange, Kris’s essay itself becomes a dramatic text.

“Theater between Borders: Navigating Culture in an Interconnected World” thus attains a relevance that far transcends the particular theatrical productions with which the essay is concerned. In taking on the question of the ethics of cultural adaptation in an interconnected world, Kris speaks to a wide and diverse audience indeed.

—Ema Vyroubalova
Theater between Borders:
Navigating Culture in an Interconnected World

Kris Sankaran

It is a drama of vast scope, a story of dynastic turmoil that escalates, via a myriad of journeys, conspiracies, and miracles, into an apocalyptic battle, a cosmic struggle between men, demons, and gods, culminating in a divine force’s active intervention in the sun’s movement in order to lead the epic’s heroes to ultimate victory. This narrative, the Mahabharata, which forms the philosophical basis for a major world religion, Hinduism, has been relayed from generation to generation for over two millennia, but in the summer of 1985 at the Avignon Theater Festival, an audience witnessed a retelling of this story through an entirely new medium—the Western theatrical tradition. This adaptation of the massive Indian epic, a work fifteen times longer than the Bible, was completed by dramatists Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière over the course of ten years, and the result was a nine-hour production that immediately generated much critical acclaim. However, before long, the production came under fierce attack by numerous Indian theater and cultural scholars, who accused the production of rampant Orientalism and the misappropriation of a sacred text. The international discourse regarding Brook’s production became steeped in hostility, reactionary nationalism, stereotyping, and cultural misunderstanding.

Fifteen years later at the Globe Theater in London, the violent, chaotic, and tragic story of Shakespeare’s King Lear was performed in a way that it had never been before. As in any performance of the play, King Lear disowns his pure daughter Cordelia after she, unlike her wicked sisters Goneril and Regan, fails to flatter him. However, Lear soon realizes his mistakes; he discovers that Goneril and Regan have begun conspiring to subvert his authority. Eventually he descends into madness while wandering through the countryside during a thunderstorm, a setting that in many ways mirrors that of the Mahabharata—a prehistoric land of vast, incomprehensible, elemental powers. However, this 1999 performance at the Globe was markedly different from previous interpretations. The Keli Dance Company was staging the drama in Kathakali, a dance and dramatic tradition with roots in Kerala, India, that state from which Keli Dance originally hails. As with Brook’s Mahabharata, reviews were sharply divided—some felt that they had gained insight through the cross-cultural dialogue, others thought the essence of both Shakespeare and Kathakali was diluted, thus rendering the performance devoid of meaning. The theater community has yet to establish a consensus on the dramatic power and effectiveness of Kathakali King Lear, which is just one of the many productions to have emerged over the last thirty years that fuses Indian and Western traditions.

Though superficially similar, Peter Brook’s adaptation of an Indian epic poem, the
program in writing and rhetoric

Mahabharata, and the Keli Dance Company’s performance of Shakespeare’s King Lear via the classical Indian dramatic genre Kathakali reflect deeply divergent methods and understandings. Both communicated enduring tales through an unorthodox medium, and each provoked audiences to consider the universality of human emotion and artistic passion by presenting unconventional readings—indeed, both stimulated much debate among audiences. Some viewed the productions as landmarks of cross-cultural appreciation; others denounced the trivialization and misrepresentation of deeply-held societal and aesthetic traditions. However, in artistic vision and in actual execution, the two performances could not be more different. It is a goal of this paper to explore these differences and illuminate a vision of intercultural exchange in theater where diverse cultures respect one another’s traditions and foster a greater understanding of the universal human experience.

The numerous changes that globalization has catalyzed have garnered a range of reactions from those in a variety of contexts. The realm of theater is no exception: numerous productions have blurred distinctions between cultures. How have these productions nurtured intercultural dialogue and understanding? Conversely, how have such performances become sources of intercultural offense and alienation? In how many productions is there an element of cultural condescension? How have traditional forms in India and the West benefited and lost from intercultural theater? Any intercultural exchange holds the potential for a variety of consequences: hostility, respect, reactionary nationalism, and mutual understanding are all possible effects of cross-cultural theater. By analyzing past performances, this paper will attempt to identify the causes of these divergent reactions and establish guidelines designed to foster international harmony through theater performance. Though I highlight occasions of cultural misunderstanding, it is not the intention of this paper to incite nationalism among Indians or to breed paranoia among Westerners attempting to participate in international dialogue. Rather, these examples serve to benefit those in intercultural situations by isolating potential hazards, with the hope that they are able to avoid them and promote international understanding. Indeed at the core of this paper’s argument is the principle that when crafted sensitively and with vision, cross-cultural artistic endeavors hold the potential to deepen international relationships and foster not simply acceptance but admiration.

Domination and Subversion in the Colonial Era:
A History Fraught with Tension

With the Bengali Theater censorship act of 1876, India’s British rulers attempted to limit the expression permitted in native drama, where actions were, in the lawmakers’ words, more likely to have a “much more vivid effect” than “any other sort of publication,” and censors made efforts to preempt any future attempts to satirize or in any other way challenge British authority through theater (Bhatia 6). In the colonial era, both Indian activists and the British establishment recognized the power of theater as a mechanism to influence opinions, and both employed theater to further their objectives. Perhaps more than any other literary or performance genre, the masses—even the illiterate—can identify with drama, with the living, breathing actors on stage, and this mass identification renders drama a powerful means of persuasion. Colonial India is an exemplary case of cultural reality influencing and in turn being influenced by theatrical performances, and though the kind of interaction between cultures that occurred in this
context is far from the modern ideal, the role of theater in this interaction highlights the wide repercussions of societal context on theater as well as the incisive power of the cross-cultural stage.

Inherent in the colonial system are pressures and conflicts that promote misunderstanding and hostility, and intercultural theater during this era reflected and arguably perpetuated these tensions. Beginning with the earliest contact, British colonizers understood that, in order to control the much larger Indian population, they could not simply forcibly impose obedience; they would have to convince enough Indians of the necessity and positive influence of British intervention. Accounts of British paternalism and the “white man’s burden,” the responsibility of civilizing unenlightened regions of the world, became standard fare in nineteenth-century India. The domain of theater was no exception to this practice, and the British colonizers justified their authority by asserting the superiority of British literature and drama. Representative of these sentiments, British Prime Minister Thomas Babington Macaulay asserted that a purpose of the British colonization of India was to create a social class “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay 430).

In particular, Shakespeare was apotheosized by the British in India, and his being embraced by the populace reflects the degree to which authorities affected the Indian cultural lens, reinforcing Western domination; this episode underscores the power that theater holds in cross-cultural contexts. Once the British mandated that Shakespeare was to be included, right alongside mathematics and writing, on governmental exams, generations of Indians began focusing parts of their education—some would argue indoctrination—on the plays of Shakespeare. Reflecting the extent of educated Indians’ adoration of Shakespeare, one contemporary native scholar described Kalidasa, arguably the greatest ancient Sanskrit dramatist, as “the Indian Shakespeare” (Bhatia 66). It was this class of educated Indians that aided the British in their control of India; without them, even a sizable British presence would not have been able to maintain such a firm grip on the expansive and populous nation. In this situation, intercultural theater elevated the status of one culture over another; theater profoundly impacted the relationship between India and the West. Partly due to theater and British promises of cultural progress, many Indians submitted to British colonialism. But this process necessarily entailed condescension towards and weakening of traditional genres. Here, intercultural contact resulted in misunderstanding and the loss of traditions; intercultural theater was more destructive than it was constructive.

However, activists and playwrights in India used the same methods of intercultural theater to subvert, rather than reinforce, British imperialism. Indeed, some even fused Shakespearean and traditional forms in their displays of Indian pride and calls for independence. Perhaps the most notable example of this phenomenon is Durlabh Bandhu by Bharatendu Harishchandra, an 1888 drama inspired by Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice that implicitly condemns British involvement in colonial activities and engages its Indian audience in the pro-Independence movement. In the play, Anant (Antonio) loses all his money in a shipwreck and has to borrow money from Shailaksha (Shylock) to help his friend Basant (Bassanio). In the event that his is unable to repay the money-lender, Anant promises to pay Shailaksha with a pound of his flesh. When his ships fail to arrive in time to repay his debts, Anant is obligated to keep his word. Only in court does Anant evade his gruesome fate, for the astute Purushi (Portia) outwits Shailaksha.
with her shrewd arguments, demanding that not a drop of blood be lost in the transaction, as it was not part of the written agreement. On a subtler level, the narrative of *Durlabh Bandhu* is an allegory of imperialist domination and native subversion. Those with authority—the rich Shailaksha in this case—oppress those whom they have power over, only to be outwitted a brilliant, insubordinate Purushi. In this case, the role of theater was not to bridge the differences between the British colonialist and Indian activist perspectives but to assert the validity of a worldview and the sophistication of a culture that were under siege. It was not intended to “promote understanding” between cultures clearly in conflict. Nevertheless, Harishchandra’s work ultimately served to highlight the similarities between seemingly divergent perspectives—by including Shakespeare and a Western format in a play focusing on the sophistication of Indian culture, *Durlabh Bandhu* underscores themes of oppression and evasion that are universal themes of the human experience. In this way, it is an early exemplar of positive intercultural theater performance.

India’s complex relationship with Shakespeare was the subject of a 1965 film by producer Ismail Merchant and director James Ivory, *Shakespeare Wallah*—in particular, the film focused on the role of Shakespeare in the years immediately following India’s independence from the British Empire. The film traces the lives and performances of the Buckingham players, a fictional theater company based on the real-life Shakespeareana troupe; in fact, several of the film’s main actors were originally members of Shakespeareana. The group finds itself performing in a variety of contexts, from schoolhouses to elite social clubs to the palaces of a maharaja, and the film highlights the range of receptions the group encounters. Though often praised by elites—whose tastes are visibly influenced by the standards and etiquette of their former British colonizers—the group finds itself abandoned by the general population, which seems more inclined to watch the glamorous movies of the emerging Bollywood industry.

![Fig 1. Scene from *Shakespeare Wallah*. The film highlights the interaction between traditions influenced by intercultural forces.](image)

In this way, the film underscores the idea that Shakespeare is not an automatically or universally revered icon. Appreciation of Shakespeare is linked to the power of the British elite to establish Western cultural supremacy; even Shakespeare is incapable of “transcending the ideological and political division” between the former colony and colonizer (Bhatia 169). Many Indians in the film reject Shakespeare as an icon of the
British Raj, catcalling during a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* and preferring movies by native Indians. On the other hand, several of the troupe’s English actors use Shakespeare performance to channel their nostalgia for the British Empire and are upset at the shift in power that accompanies postcolonialism. Their love of Shakespeare seems to be connected to their attachment to the British Empire. Western theater in India is thus inherently linked to colonial British authority.

In a central subplot, a romance develops between Lizzie Buckingham, a Shakespeare performer, and Sanju Rai, an aristocratic Indian. The eventual failure of their romance, even after a passionate courtship, is symbolic of India and England’s inability to reconcile their histories and unite in the aftermath of Indian independence. Indeed, the fact that Sanju rejects Lizzie, rather than the other way around, indicates the dramatic power-reversal that occurred with independence and the degree to which Western ideas were rejected in postcolonial India. In this way, the film captures the role of theater in influencing the dynamic between Indian and English cultures during the aftermath of the India’s independence. The film encapsulates the experience of individuals in an intercultural theater setting, and it symbolizes the profound influence that such a situation has on the reception and interpretation of theater. In the upheaval of decolonization, both British and Indian theater creators and audiences reevaluated long-standing practices, in many cases leading to the rejection of Shakespeare. Thus, as symbolized by *Durlabh Bandhu* and *Shakespeare Wallah*, theatrical performances and international events leave deep imprints on each other. Social changes affect the reactions to theater, and theater in turn reflects and reinforces shifts in cultural perspectives.

Modern Interculturalism: Confronting Alternate Perspectives

Part of the power of theater emerges from its ability to engage those from dramatically different contexts; it holds the potential to influence the attitudes and challenge the assumptions of individuals whose perspectives differ widely. Such performances facilitate an encounter of ideas that is associated with both great constructive and destructive potential, and to hope to practice positive intercultural contact, it is often necessary to understand the differing cultural lenses through which individuals view cross-cultural theater.

Contact between India and the West is no new phenomenon—though much popular discourse directs attention to the widespread globalization accompanying modernity, such accounts ignore deep histories of intercultural communication. These histories play a large role in coloring the perspectives of contemporary audiences to intercultural theater. Modern Western liberalism tends to associate communication between various cultures as necessarily positive and dynamic—such contact is viewed as an opportunity to learn from the traditions of others as well as celebrate the universality of the human experience. This attitude is a fixture of cosmopolitanism, a very pervasive and powerful idea in the modern West. Surely, there are those in the West who denounce international exploitation by powerful political and economic organizations, but their frustration tends to be directed more towards impersonal institutions—corporations and governments—rather than cross-cultural artistic endeavors. Indeed, the notion of world fusion in the arts is generally advocated. These attitudes stem from a history in which the West has freely benefited from exposure to international art forms; Van Gogh was famously inspired by Japanese woodcut prints, and Picasso’s Cubism was in part motivated by his
viewing masks from the Dan region of Africa. Thus, it is a natural assumption among those in the West that cultural exchange is a source of artistic growth.

Conversely, in India, international exchanges and cross-cultural artists are viewed with suspicion, especially among, but not necessarily confined to, traditionalists. Since Indian independence, cultural exchange has come to arouse distrust, even reactionary nationalism; from the perspective of prominent Indian cultural theorist and theater critic Rustom Bharucha, “not every exchange is necessarily dynamic” (Bharucha, *Politics* 33). Indeed, Indian audiences are especially sensitive to cross-cultural contact that is “coercive or assimilationist, if not blatantly colonial” (Bharucha, *Politics* 33). This perspective is influenced by centuries of colonial subjugation—a period when culture was regulated by British authority. International exchange has come to be associated with colonialism, with oppression and cultural appropriation. Many Indians, particularly artists, are very sensitive to the suppression of traditional culture by foreign powers, for their history is replete with examples of those with imperial authority censoring and controlling native practices—from repression of traditional drama to requiring knowledge of Shakespeare for governmental job placement exams.

In the eyes of many in India, this kind of exploitation continues today—and it is no surprise, with some credible Western writers asserting that, prior to British colonization, Indian drama was only “a medley of all-too-familiar didactic tales rehashed from the epics and the puranas, a crude potpourri of song, dance, mime, and farce that hardly qualified as legitimate drama” (Frost 93). The same critic disparaged research concerning Westerners’ Orientalism and coercive tendencies as “fashionable” and unnecessary—an opinion clearly disconnected from the realities of history and attitudes in India (Frost 93). The prevailing attitude is that intercultural exchange can result in colonialism, that “the idea and process of cross-cultural contact are not postwar inventions but the essential conditions of colonialism” (Chaudri 157). Those in the West and those in India hold deeply divergent views on the nature of intercultural contact, and these tensions often manifest themselves in reactions to intercultural theater performances. It is important to be familiar with these differing assumptions in any project attempting to appeal to individuals in either culture.

Furthermore, beyond ideological complications, material concerns come into play when analyzing conflicts in cross-cultural exchanges, especially in cases where participants are divided between wealthy and developing nations. Economic incentives have caused what could potentially be intercultural theater experiences to be limited to higher-class venues in particular cultures—undermining the potential of intercultural theater to contribute to art and traditions within multiple cultures. Such decisions are usually motivated by pure financial concerns of theater companies, but it is clear how such behavior can breed resentment across cultures. Instances of selective broadcasting of performances are often linked to accusations that intercultural theater has a colonialist aura—that traditions are being appropriated without any reciprocation. It is critical that performances avoid accusations of cultural tourism or “packaging fragments of exoticized cultures for the consumption of privileged audiences around the world” (Chaudri 38). Accusations of exploitation and misunderstanding are common in intercultural contact; they are what generate so much tension in cross-cultural encounters.

However, though the ideas and assumptions between cultures may conflict, theater creators should not be discouraged from attempting to bridge the divide—indeed, these
tensions make intercultural theater all the more meaningful. It provides an opportunity for individuals to challenge assumptions and thereby obtain greater understanding of other cultures as well as their own. Though it is clear that intercultural theater is a minefield riddled with the unique histories and sensitivities of those in a variety of contexts, the benefit of such dialogue is too great to be ignored. History may contain examples of theater that disrespected other cultures, either through Orientalism, misunderstanding, or bigotry, but such lapses, even if they are more derisive and harmful than mild cultural faux pas, should not be the determining factor for the future of intercultural theater. If carefully crafted, intercultural theater performances will not only preserve the established traditions and cultural richness of those from whom they borrow, they will invigorate those traditions and inspire cross-cultural enthusiasm. Intercultural contact does not automatically generate greater understanding—at times, such contact can be the source of great tension and hostility—however, when conscientiously organized, such exchange may not only facilitate exposure to other attitudes, it may inspire deeper mutual respect between and greater creativity within cultures.

Pitfalls of Intercultural Performance

Peter Brook’s Mahabharata was conceived with the best intentions—a performance to celebrate the multiculturalism of the modern world and to immerse Western audiences in a narrative central to the Hindu experience. In his epic retelling of the ancient Indian narrative—a story of such vast scope and cultural importance that most directors would tremble at the thought of adapting it to the stage—Brook would employ a diverse cast, striking visual effects, and innovative direction. In his preparation for the production, Brook traveled to India to research the subjects he would be transmitting to Western audiences. However, in certain aspects of its theoretical foundation and in its actual execution—ranging from sweeping generalizations in the preface to its failure to inform the audience of certain cultural values in the conclusion—Brook’s production is crucially flawed as intercultural drama, and these few erroneous assumptions and poor decisions came to instigate international antagonism and haunt his Mahabharata.

In order to carefully create and appropriately evaluate cross-cultural theater performances, it is first necessary to be familiar with that which has the potential to alienate and offend in intercultural performances. Poor cross-cultural understanding—a potential pitfall for any individual, even those with the ability to travel and immerse themselves abroad—can preclude the creation of successful intercultural theater performance. Central to assessing the impact of these performances, it is most important to observe the degree of involvement by and the nature of the interaction between the cultures being bridged.

Historically among theater figures, Orientalism and exoticism have rendered any positive cross-cultural theater performances between the West and India impossible. Orientalism tends to highlight the “otherness” of those in foreign cultures, to undermine any potential that art holds to accentuate the universality of aspects of the human experience and to deepen bonds across borders. A hallmark of such Orientalism is the limited inclusion of those from one of the involved cultures. For example, in spite of the multicultural cast of Brook’s Mahabharata, he includes only one Indian performer, actress Mallika Sarabhai as Draupadi, and involves no Indian voices in the play’s conception, writing, and development. Further, he never staged his Mahabharata, a work critical to
modern Indian culture and values, in India; he only ever staged it in Paris and New York. Of course, Brook and his colleagues went to India to research the subject matter of their play, but Carrière, the author of the drama’s script, writes that “wherever we went, we met sages, scholars, villagers, pleased to find foreigners interested in their great epic and generously happy to share their understanding” (Carrière xiv-xv). He writes as if he were an explorer in an exotic foreign land, cut off from any foreign contact, whose welcoming natives reflect the natural pureness of the territory. His description is idealized and completely disconnected from any of modern India’s economic or political woes; such romanticization and selective memory is reflected in his treatment of the Mahabharata, which lacks many culturally important scenes.

In Brook’s Mahabharata, romanticization of India weakened its potential to contribute to the culture of both India and the West; it was only popular in the West, and even then, it provided an inaccurate view of India and the Mahabharata. Brook’s rhetoric surrounding his travels to India reveals a disconnection from modern India and a fixation upon “classical, devotional, and folk traditions” as well as interest confined to “classical Indian aesthetics and the perfection of bodily movement and gesture in traditional forms” (Bhatia 158). This obsession with the differences between those in other cultures is reflected in his production, which devotes a disproportionate amount of time—a full third of the play—to the final battle scene, and by doing so, loses the subplots that have significant repercussions in the Indian political, social, and theological worldview. Gone are the legends of “Rama and Sita, Savitri, Manu, Bhagiratha, Nala and Damayanti, Garuda, Some, and others” (Dasgupta 14).

Surely, it is absurd to expect any adaptation of the Mahabharata to ignore traditional classical Indian aesthetics or to include the multitude of details that compromise the epic, but it would be entirely possible to shift the emphasis away from displays of classical bodily movement and the final battle scene, to focus instead on the stories that have deep significance in understanding Indian reality and attitudes—the India beyond the exotic, Orientalized India of Western popular culture. By encompassing these perhaps less visually striking or dramatically engaging characteristics, his production may have

Fig. 2. Battle scene from Peter Brook’s Mahabharata. Scenes such as this one suggest an overemphasis on this episode of the Indian epic.
Kris Sankaran

delved into themes more important to understanding modern Indian philosophy and the cross-cultural ties that unite India and the West, concepts such as dharama, or duty, karma, loyalty, and love which are central to understanding the Mahabharata. Indeed, rather than reinforcing the “otherness” of Indians, he may have underscored the universality of the human experience. He unnecessarily accentuates differences by focusing on exotic and visually stunning scenes, and he allows cultural exchange to “descend to banal generalities about the foreign culture,” failing to “uncover its specificities, in actual, and not merely perceived, links with its own society” (Dasgupta 11). Cultural exchange in theater should be a reciprocal process, not a medium with which one culture reinforces its stereotypes of another. Further, Brook’s emphasis of the past and otherness in India is responsible for his ignoring that “the poem [the Mahabharata] is very much a text in and for the present because it is constantly being rewritten” (Bhatia 160). He misses an opportunity for contemporary dialogue with India, a chance to connect cultures and ideas. Even if he did not incorporate elements of modern Mahabharata readings in his production, it would have been very possible and beneficial to include some culturally significant scenes and describe the imprint of the Mahabharata on modern Indian life. Instead, he focuses on a limited number of scenes and the classical background of the work in a way that only contributes to the West.

Thus, Brook’s production exemplifies the phenomenon of taxonomic theater, a type of intercultural theater that classifies other cultures in relation to a dominant culture, primarily Western traditional theater culture. Though advocates of taxonomic theater, also sometimes called theater anthropologists, assert that their work strives to uncover the universality in humanity, in practice, taxonomic theater is essentially “dedicated to clearly and simplistically demarcating the boundaries between cultures” (Chaudri 34). It is perhaps because of his tendency to underscore “alien” practices and ideas in other cultures that Brook’s handling of the Mahabharata drew the ire of so many Indians, who saw his production as a trivialization of a sacred book and an affront to their philosophy. Some have criticized the production’s shallow characters, including its “two-dimensional portraiture of Krishna,” a critical figure in Hindu theology (Bharucha, View 1644). The shallowness of characters is a byproduct of Orientalism—it is impossible to portray characters meaningfully when they are reduced to broad generalizations. Brook has been accused of “emphasizing, even fetishizing, cultural difference,” an unfortunate outcome, considering intercultural theater holds so much positive potential (Chaudri 34).

Orientalism is a remnant of colonial exploitation in that it is a form of cultural condescension and ensures that only one culture benefits from intercultural exchange. It is crucial that those crafting theater that merges various cultures avoid the temptation to generalize and solely focus on benefitting one culture: ideal intercultural theater borrows and contributes equally to all involved cultures. Only with meaningful interaction is it possible to transcend the generalizations and misunderstandings of the past.

Evolution of and Vision for Intercultural Theater

Twenty-five years have elapsed since Peter Brook’s Mahabharata, and a variety of performances have explored the potentialities of intercultural theater. As the genre has matured, its methods have become more refined, its goals more sophisticated. There are still many opportunities for experimentation, and a set of principles for the production of positive intercultural theater has begun to emerge to guide future theater creators and
performers.

It will be useful to survey some of these core principles by examining the production and performances of Kathakali King Lear, which, though it was still criticized by some traditionalists, offers a model for theater that employs techniques from and enriches both Western and Indian traditions. The performance is striking, the visuals vivid, and the narrative compelling. For those in the West, the new medium invigorates an often-performed narrative, and for audiences in India, the Shakespearean narrative is a refreshing addition to the canon of a traditional genre. Though the costumes and techniques may seem exotic superficially, the foundational ideology and actual execution of the performances serve to highlight universal themes while celebrating specific traditions.

Kathakali is a dance and dramatic genre hailing from the southwestern state of Kerala in India. The tradition employs no spoken word—narratives are communicated through precise and evocative gestures and expressions. Performers dress in elaborate costumes and wear colorful makeup that indicates their placement into established character archetypes—for example, green symbolizes nobility while black represents villainy. Thus, it is clear that the tradition has many established patterns that would confront the intercultural theater creator with many challenges—what changes would enhance the performance’s impact, what changes would devalue it? There is no obvious answer, but particular decisions made by the Keli Dance Company, the producers of Kathakali King Lear, may provide some insight into this question as well as other principles of positive intercultural theater.

Kathakali King Lear represents a shift away from the notion that intercultural theater serves to transport the ideas of a “source” culture into a “target” culture, a framework first established by intercultural theorist Patrice Pavis in his work on cross-cultural theater. Indeed, unlike Brook’s Mahabharata, which was only staged in Paris and New York, Kathakali King Lear toured both India and England, gaining attention with performances at both Shakespeare’s Globe in London and at Kathakali’s cultural center, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Further, it is impossible to classify the drama as either predominantly Indian or English, and this fusion of disjoint traditions marks the production as an exemplar for future intercultural performance. It employs a traditional Indian dramatic medium to present a classic English play, but aspects of both Kathakali and King Lear are modified in order to accommodate the needs of a performance intended for both Western and Indian audiences. Unlike Brook’s production, which is a Western appropriation—and many would argue, a misappropriation—of an Indian text into
the Western theater form without adopting any specifically Indian traditional idioms, Kathakali King Lear exhibits various modifications to both Kathakali and King Lear in order to enhance the performance’s value among and bridge the differences between those in a variety of contexts.

For example, aspects of Shakespeare’s drama were altered when the performance’s creators deemed such action necessary. For example, there was some controversy surrounding the drama’s choices for Kathakali analogues to Goneril, Regan, and King Lear. Goneril and Regan were presented as demonic teppu, a form that, though able to symbolize the characters’ capacity for monstrous actions, is less able to capture the sinister, conspiring nature of the characters (Daugherty 61). Indeed, the barbarity of the types is sometimes reserved for farcically cruel characters; even if attempts were made to downplay this aspect, some nuances of Shakespeare’s drama were sacrificed. The archetype katti was chosen for King Lear; katti translates literally into knife. Though the form reflects the darker, self-destructive tendencies of King Lear, it is typically not associated with nobility. The form is only an approximation of the Shakespearean tragic hero. Kathakali King Lear treated both Kathakali and Shakespeare with less rigor and authenticity than more traditional, intracultural performances.

Conversely, while most of the play’s characters can be classified into Kathakali typology—the King of France as a paccha, or nobleman, Cordelia as a minnuku, a pure woman, Goneril and Regan as teppu, or demons, etc.—the creators departed from Kathakali conventions with the character of the Fool (Daugherty 60). The Fool, who has no obvious analogue in Kathakali, was depicted as a vidushaka, a jester character form typically reserved to genres only remotely connected to Kathakali. Nonetheless, the decision was seen as necessary in order to stay faithful to Shakespeare’s directions. Further, the casting of a European woman, Annette Leday, in the role of Cordelia marked a dramatic departure from Kathakali’s all-male, all-Indian convention. Lascivious rumors circulated in the Indian Kathakali circuit; the break from convention was greeted with gossip and resistance by traditionalists. However, in the eyes of the progressive producers of Kathakali King Lear, artistic license was necessary to advance their intercultural vision. Indeed, it is arguable that, by including a woman in the performance, the production expanded Kathakali’s horizons, enriching the tradition rather than undermining it. The potential benefits of this perspective are wide-ranging—in the process of adapting certain traditions, it becomes possible to enhance them, to provide unexpected power and insight. It is challenging, perhaps impossible, to judge objectively that which is appropriate artistic liberty and that which is disrespecting tradition, but every sensitive maker of intercultural theater must daily confront such decisions. In the eyes of the creators of Kathakali King Lear, loss to the Indian tradition was seen as minimal, and more than enough compensated by the benefits of portraying the character in the way Shakespeare envisioned.

Balancing the influences of traditions in intercultural theater is ideal, but in any intercultural theater performance, there are bound to be some difficult, seemingly arbitrary decisions to make, choices that often draw criticism from traditionalists. Nevertheless, these accommodations, if prudently implemented, may allow audiences to gain further, refreshing insight. Some criticisms are the result of cultural misunderstanding and close-mindedness—a London critic mocked the peacock feathers that Goneril and Regan wore as “big toilet brushes” (Gardner 18). However, some criticism is
substantive and sophisticated, pointing to the very real revisionism in intercultural performance. For example, one Shakespeare scholar asserted that “outrageous clowning and mock ferocity undermine any sinister impact [Goneril] might otherwise have” (Pitkow 224). This is a very valid criticism directed towards the portrayal of Goneril as a teppu, and it speaks to the core problems of merging cultures through theater. It is difficult to sensitively reconcile traditions that have deep histories predating any prolonged contact between cultures, let alone between art forms. Beyond technical matters of performance, it is difficult to resolve the differences in worldviews of cultures that matured in isolation from each other. For example, distinguished Kathakali critic Appukuttan Nair took issue with a performance, not focusing on the “female Cordelia, the heroic King of France, missing headgear, or blips in character type choice, but on the non-epic nature of the characters” (Daugherty 64). Nair presented his philosophical disagreement with the creators of Kathakali King Lear as follows:

Only epic, non-human beings are chosen for the re-creation of a story for presentation on the stage. And that presentation, whether in form, colour, behaviour, or sound, is deliberately made contra-human, to exist in another world: that of the imagination of the connoisseur. (D. A. Nair and Paniker 10)

It may be easy to point out the problems with past intercultural theater performances, as was demonstrated by critics’ deconstruction of Peter Brook’s Mahabharata, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, of Kathakali King Lear, but it remains an overwhelming task, and will probably stay so for the foreseeable future, to successfully incorporate, respect, and expand the traditions of multiple cultures in a single performance. This is the vision that underlies the most successful intercultural productions, and it is one that, though a daunting task, holds potential to positively redefine cultural interconnections.

Though the intercultural theater is a relatively recent development in the theater world, analyzing a few past performances can inform how to better craft future performances. As the genre develops and as new productions explore the potentialities of intercultural theater, there is hope that performances leave taxonomic theater in the past and seek to generally engage the cultures in which performances become immersed, that, as so many have hoped for before, “home countries and communities, from where these resources emanated, receive for their contribution to the creative process” (Chaudri 39). Though history is replete with examples of intercultural strife, colonialism, nationalism, and misunderstanding, the new millennium promises an unprecedented level of cross-cultural communication and contact resulting from globalization, and, perhaps, in the domain of intercultural theater, this dialogue can foster mutual respect, understanding, and growth. Cross-cultural exchanges are complex and fraught with tensions and ambiguities, but only by confronting these challenges is there hope to overcome them. Historically, intercultural theater has both reflected the nature of intercultural relationships as well as influenced their development. From Durlabh Bandhu to Shakespeare Wallah, from the Mahabharata to Kathakali King Lear, intercultural theater has not simply been a byproduct of cultural interaction—it has been an active agent in shaping cultural vision and philosophies. Intercultural theater has the potential to shape worldviews—to either reinforce colonialism or promote dialogue, to incite antagonism or advocate harmony. In this way, intercultural theater can serve as a guide for how to model international contact: its relevance is not confined to performing arts or the
artifice of the stage, it is crucial for our navigation through the complex reality of an interconnected globe.

Works Cited


Scene from Shakespeare Wallah. MerchantIvory.com; Web; 17 Mar. 2010.